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Behind the Headlines: Media Representation of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland

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'Behind the Headlines'

Media Representation of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland



The voices and experiences of children and young people

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

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Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative
Queen's University Belfast

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'Behind the Headlines'

Media Representation of Children and Young
People in Northern Ireland

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Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative

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Engaged in projects seeking to challenge the structural marginalisation of children and young people, our research is underpinned by the principles of social justice. We aim to raise awareness at an individual and community level, as well as inform local policy and practice. We are concerned about issues of social exclusion, particularly in the contexts of the transitions experienced by all children and young people and Northern Ireland's societal transition from armed conflict. The Initiative adopts a critical rights-based perspective grounded in international human rights conventions and standards. Through our research we consider how rights, particularly those promoted and protected by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, impact on the everyday lives of children and young people. Rather than focusing solely on the implementation of international standards we consider the contexts in which they emerged and, the structural barriers to their implementation and their potential for positive change.

Include Youth

Include Youth is an independent non-governmental organisation that actively promotes the rights, best interests of and best practice with disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people. Established in May 1979 as the Northern Ireland Intermediate Treatment Association (NIITA), Include Youth undertakes activities aimed at influencing public policy and policy awareness in youth justice and the education, employment and training of young people. It works directly with young people to support them to be engaged with policy decision-making processes and to improve their employability. It prioritises policy advocacy that both informs, and is informed by, direct practitioner and young people support services. It produces resources and provides training, information and support to practitioners and organisations.

Identifying and Challenging the Negative Media Representation of Children and Young People in Northern Ireland

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Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council this partnership project between the Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative at Queen's University and Include Youth focuses on the negative stereotyping of children and young people and the role and responsibilities of the media in the creation and transmission of negative images. Engaging with children, young people, organisations working with children and young people and media representatives, the project uses research evidence to explore negative media representation and its consequences for children's rights, public reaction and policy initiatives in Northern Ireland. It is committed to promoting public engagement within communities and encouraging the participation of children and young people in developing alternative perspectives on their lives and experiences. Based on an understanding of international standards it also informs children of their rights.

ESRC Knowledge Exchange Programme

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Knowledge Exchange Programme provides funding for researchers and professionals in the statutory and non-statutory sectors to develop shared research to inform social policy and practice. Through the programme academic researchers have consolidated their commitment to public engagement, maximising the impact of their collaborative work.

The Project

'The Committee recommends that the State party ensure full protection against discrimination on any grounds ... taking urgent measures to address the intolerance and inappropriate characterization of children, especially adolescents, within the society, including in the media.'

(Concluding Observations, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2008: para 25a)

'Four in five of the young people surveyed felt that the media portrayal of young people was 'mostly negative'. I challenge the media to think again about how it portrays young people, so that it does not feed discrimination against young people.'

(Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, 12 April 2011)

As a society emerging from three decades of conflict, and in the early years of political devolution, Northern Ireland has faced particular circumstances and significant challenges. Those concerning children and young people, including the persistence of informal policing and punishments by paramilitaries, remain paramount. The 'mostly negative' media representation of children acknowledged by the Northern Ireland Commissioner is consistent with the UNCRC's criticisms of the 'intolerance and inappropriate characterization' of children and young people by the media and its impact on public opinion. During this extended period of transition in Northern Ireland the negative representation of children and young people has the potential to fuel and sustain the control and punishment of children by paramilitaries.

This innovative project developed community-based research already established within the Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative¹ and its relationships with communities and children's sector organisations. It aimed to conduct collaborative research to inform policy and practice, engage users and those who will benefit most from this collaboration. Drawing on the skills and resources of organisations associated with the Initiative's work, and their established relationships in community, voluntary and statutory sectors, it sought to identify and challenge negative

perceptions and representations of children and young people with the intention of increasing public understanding of children's rights and media responsibility.²

The participation of children and young people in helping design the project, in workshops, and in the production of resources, aimed to inform them about the media and their rights. On completion of the research project resources will be shared with children and youth organisations to inform their practice and advocacy work. It is expected that the research will inform and further develop relationships with media professionals, politicians and civil servants and with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People to encourage policy implementation and reform within the media.

Who did we consult?

Throughout the project the lead researcher within the *Childhood, Transition and Social Justice Initiative* at Queen's University worked closely with the Communications Officer at *Include Youth*. This involved: monitoring and analysing media coverage, particularly newspaper content focusing on children and young people; constructing case studies of good practice in challenging media representation; designing resources for consulting with children, young people and voluntary sector organisations; and holding workshops across Northern Ireland. The Ideas Voice Action Forum at *Include Youth*, a group of young people from across Northern Ireland (rural, town, city), provided the youth and youth workers' advisory group for the project. The Forum was also involved directly in the design and testing of workshop materials.

Workshops were held with children and young people, aged between 6 and 25, representing twenty one groups across Northern Ireland. These included generic youth groups and issue-based and programme specific groups: young people in conflict with the law or defined as 'at risk'; children and young people with disabilities; migrant children; homeless young people; young people not in education, employment or training; younger children; children and young people living in an interface

¹ McAlister, S., Haydon, D and Scraton, P. (2010) *Childhood in Transition: Experiencing Conflict and Marginalisation in Northern Ireland* Queen's University/ Save the Children/ The Prince's Trust

² In her in-depth research and analysis Gordon's (2006; 2012) research provides an extensive evidence-base of negative media representation of children and young people

area; children and young people in custody; young people living in rural communities; young women’s and young men’s groups; LGB youth; young people living in areas of high economic deprivation. A total of 141 children and young people participated.

The workshops involved a range of interactive visual and discussion-based tasks focusing on two key themes: perceptions of media representation of children and young people; messages for journalists and the media on reporting about children and young people. Children, young people and their workers also were provided with resources designed by the project team about children’s rights including those related to the media.

A further workshop was held with representatives of the media in Northern Ireland to report the project team’s findings from its consultations with children and young people. This workshop provided the opportunity to discuss and develop resources that children and young people had considered significant to inform journalists and editors.

Children’s and Young People’s Perceptions of Media Representation

‘Childhood’ is socially constructed as a period of ‘vulnerability’ and dependency on adults. Within dominant discourses, ‘childhood’ is perceived as a ‘developmental stage’, whereby children are ‘angelically pure’ and ‘innocent’.³ In contrast, historical analyses demonstrate the recurrence of the social construction of ‘youth’ as a ‘problem’,⁴ and young people described as ‘anti-social’, ‘irresponsible’ and ‘rebellious’.

Research analysing media representations of children and young people typically notes that children and young people are portrayed differently, with most negative coverage focusing on young people. Significantly, as Gordon’s research into media portrayals in Northern Ireland observes, while young people are portrayed routinely as ‘troublesome’, it is evident that an additional layer of condemnation and outrage appears in news items relating to children’s alleged involvement in crime and violence.⁵ Thus the traditional social construction of childhood ‘innocence’ transforms into its opposite, as children are represented as having transgressed adult established boundaries and expectations.

3 See Robinson and Davis (2008)
4 See Jewkes, (2009)
5 Gordon (2012)

How ‘Children’ are represented

The workshops with children and young people explored their understanding of the ‘mass media’ and their experiences of media outlets encountered in their daily lives.

Suffering physical harm

Children and young people reported that often they were portrayed in the media as ‘victims’ of harm. Children’s discussion groups focused on being victims of abuse, abduction and death. They raised particular concerns about children’s vulnerability and adult ‘predators’:

‘Children who have died, been abused or hurt gone missing’

‘Abductions... children who have gone missing’

‘There’s children killed every week by their parents’

In contrast, young people raised issues of self-harm and suicide. They considered that media reporting of suicide failed to consider the lack of appropriate mental ill-health services and support. While they felt that adults in communities receive support, this was not available as readily to young people:

‘Young people are just as vulnerable as older people... there’s more issues for young people’

Experiencing adversity

Children and young people raised several issues affecting the lives of *other* children and young people and their representation in the media, including: ‘*sexual exploitation and abuse*’; ‘*poverty*’; ‘*homelessness*’; ‘*bereavement*’ and ‘*being bullied*’.

Children and young people made reference to children ‘*being abused*’, by parents or other significant adults such as doctors or priests. Abuse of children was raised in the wake of media revelations about sexual abuse (particularly well-known celebrities). Discussions included reference to specific cases - ‘Jimmy Savile’, ‘Baby P’, ‘Madeleine McCann’.

Discussions of ‘*sexual exploitation*’ included references to ‘*under-age sex*’, and reference to a TV programme on which a male actor was ‘*offered sex by girls in India*’, and ‘child marriage’ in ‘*other*’ countries. Similarly, children’s discussions with reference to ‘*poverty*’ included

stories about children in Gaza and Syria, homelessness and starvation. Young people discussed their financial difficulties, in particular as ‘*a single mum*’ or attempting ‘*to live independently*’. Yet they did not consider themselves as living in areas affected by poverty.

In discussing bereavement children focused on those who had ‘*lost their Mum or Dad in an accident*’ or ‘*their houses in a tornado*’.

The reporting of ‘*bullying*’ of other people ‘*for their homosexuality, their beliefs*’ and ‘*kneecapping*’ by RAAD [Republican Action Against Drugs] or paramilitaries were raised by young people.

‘Crime’ and drug use

The volume of news stories relating to ‘crime’ was raised as an issue, including ‘*stabbing[s], theft, car crimes, arson, and robbery*’; ‘*attacking old people, raiding houses, gangs, knife crime*’. Examples of media coverage of crime included:

‘Kids who murder their parents or other children.’

‘People getting sentenced for things like petty theft, armed and battery, murder, drugs.’

‘When someone has killed someone ... stealing ... breaking the rules.’

Media coverage focusing on young people’s behaviour was described as more prominent than that focusing on children’s behaviour. Typical stories were those emphasising ‘*disorderly behaviour*’, ‘*being bad*’, ‘*being in with the wrong crowd*’, ‘*rioting*’, and ‘*killing someone*’.

Young people believed that they received the most extreme labels for perceived involvement in ‘anti-social behaviour’ and ‘crime’. The examples they gave of the labels routinely used were: ‘*scumbags*’; ‘*scum*’; ‘*evil*’; ‘*hoods*’; ‘*hoodies*’. They discussed how such negative representations ‘*stereotyped*’ and ‘*generalised*’ children and young people as constantly involved in ‘risky’ behaviours, such as drug use, which had damaged their communities. Children and young people also discussed the impact of ‘hate crime’, particularly on young children.

Anti-social behaviour, rioting, protests

All groups interviewed raised media reporting of ‘*anti-social behaviour*’. Invariably this was associated with ‘*drinking*’ and ‘*hanging out with mates*’. They also felt the media’s portrayal of anti-social behaviour extended to assumptions about involvement of children in ‘*rioting*’, ‘*protests*’ and ‘*bad behaviour in public*’. The news coverage they highlighted as focusing on young people’s anti-social behaviour included: ‘*Breaking into old people’s houses ... joyriding*’; ‘*Graffiti, fireworks*’.

Young people made the direct link between negative representations and being targeted:

‘Young people automatically get the blame.’

‘You see older people drinkin’ on the streets too and they never [put] drunk adults in the papers.’

‘[Adults] think we are wee hoods.’

Young people held contrasting views regarding rioting and protests. While some stated, ‘*It’s mainly teenagers*’, others disagreed: ‘*No, it’s also children because of teenagers’ influence*’.

Similarly when discussing recent Flag Protests,⁶ which followed from the Belfast City Council’s decision, to restrict flying the Union flag at the City Hall to eighteen designated days each year, young people were dismissive:

‘Children don’t even know what they’re even rioting about.’

‘Young kids don’t know what the union flag represents.’

They perceived children’s involvement in rioting and protests as non-political and influenced by ‘*teenagers*’ or ‘*adults*’ including ‘*parents*’ or ‘*grandparents*’. Yet their views on these issues were never sought by journalists nor reported in media coverage.

Ill-health

Children and young people highlighted health-related media coverage including: ‘*obesity*’, ‘*depression*’, and ‘*immunisation*’.

6 For further information, see Nolan *et al.*’s (2014) report on the Flag ‘dispute’.

Illness was raised by young people, in particular current stories about *‘Africa’, ‘malnourishment and Ebola’*.

They were concerned about *‘closure of a hospital or specialist clinics’*, causing children and their parents to have to travel distances to receive treatment.

School

Children and young people mentioned education, referring to: *‘cuts, sex education in primary schools, schools being too strict or too easy, tests being too hard or too easy’, ‘the shite education system’* and *‘grades improving every year.’* Their discussions of negative media coverage focused on the *‘cost’* of the education system and the impact of the *‘cuts’*. In particular, those on alternative education programmes discussed the media’s focus on educational attainment rather than failings within the system.

On-line

Young people discussed the media’s negative portrayal of issues, in particular *‘risk’* or *‘influence’* of the internet or video games. They were concerned particularly about media coverage of the relationship between video games and violence.

Children and young people highlighted media portrayal on the internet, *‘usually related to stories about children accessing inappropriate information’*. Discussions of *‘risk’, ‘protection’* and *‘monitoring’* emphasised their concerns in relation to the internet and online safety.

The following emerged as positive themes:

Primary school activities

Coverage that depicted children in a positive light typically related to *‘school trips’, receiving ‘awards’ or ‘certificates’, children’s ‘first or last day at school’, ‘school sports events’,* and being in a *‘school play’*. Invariably, emphasis was on educational attainment and/or talent.

Sports and leisure activities

Positive community-based stories about children included their involvement in: *‘Scouts’, ‘taking their Holy Communion’, ‘helping out in their communities’, ‘the opening of new buildings or shops’,* and *‘youth club trips’*. One group mentioned *‘something in the paper about UN Conferences – children as the new leaders’*. Children and young people identified positive media

coverage of sporting achievements.

Fundraising

Children’s fundraising was an example of positive media coverage, particularly with reference to charities: *‘Children in Need’, the ‘shoebox appeal’,* and raising money for youth clubs through a *‘Young Enterprise’* scheme.

How ‘Young People’ are represented

Demonisation and the criminalisation of ‘youth’

All young people’s groups felt excluded and demonised stating that the majority of negative media representations focused on teenagers and young people in their early twenties. The portrayal of young people as *‘bad’* or *‘evil’* was a consistent theme raised within the workshops: *‘News makes young people out to be all bad’*.

Young people stated that the media constantly emphasised the relationship between youth, crime and anti-social behaviour. The most common labels were extreme: *‘scumbags’, ‘scum’, ‘evil’, ‘hoods’,* and *‘hoodies’*.

They also gave examples of media coverage of criminal behaviour: *‘stabbing, theft, car crimes, arson, robbery’; ‘attacking old people, raiding houses, gangs, knife crime’; ‘being in trouble with the police’*.

Young people mainly referred to representations of their behaviour as *‘perpetrators’*. While noting, *‘You do hear of kids being the victims too’*, this was rarely reported.

They were aware that media coverage distinguished between children and young people: *‘There’s an extreme difference ... especially if children are more likely to be the victims of crime’*. Young people, however, were more *‘often portrayed as perpetrating the crime’*.

With reference to what has been termed *‘recreational rioting’* by politicians and the media, the following was a typical response:

‘All people need to be educated on the history of Northern Ireland. The young people only riot because they are influenced by the older generation. Kids aged 7 and 8 would not have a clue what they

are throwing bricks and bottles for... they just think it’s for fun.’

Thus young people made a distinction between childhood and youth. They considered that children’s involvement in rioting was for *‘fun’*, or alternatively they were led into protesting by adults without understanding the reasons behind protests or interface tensions. They stated that media coverage failed to reflect this in its representation of rioting and they wanted the media to discuss the influence of adults and the lasting impact of conflict on their lives.

Young people raised the media’s coverage of young people *‘getting drunk’, ‘binge drinking’, ‘under-age drinking’* and taking and selling drugs.

Problems and risks

It was clear that many topics raised by children reflected media preoccupation with young people’s *‘anti-social’* or *‘offending’* behaviour, drug and alcohol use. Young people also mentioned these issues, adding others relevant to their lives: jobs and employment; suicide; social media; sex and sexually transmitted infections; contraception and pregnancy; and political engagement.

In particular, young people referred to coverage of *‘teen pregnancies’* and *‘lack of contraception’*. Young women were concerned about: *‘lack of employment opportunities’; ‘difficulties getting a house’; ‘impressions of single mums’*. As one young woman stated: *‘You can be a bad mum and be in your forties, but it always seems like young mums are bad’*.

The following emerged as positive themes:

Educational attainment

They felt that stories about teenagers were *‘positive, only if directly linked to education’*; particularly in relation to examination results, league tables and university studies.

Sport

Sporting activities were mentioned as another example of positive media images of young people: *‘Praising young people who do well in sports and academically’*. This excluded many young people not involved in sports teams.

Exceptional achievements

All groups considered that for young people to be represented positively they had to do something *‘extreme’*. A young person commented: *‘Six years ago I saved a boy’s life in a pool and they said this 12 year old was so brave saving a 10 year old... I got an award’*.

How ‘specific groups’ are represented

Care experienced children and young people

Care experienced young people criticised media coverage that, *‘brings things back to them being care leavers, even if the story is nothing to do with that - if people are on drugs, it will mention they were in care’*.

One young person stated:

‘There’s rarely a story about something positive a care leaver has done, like going to college or university. It’s all about negative things – 20% of suicides are care leavers, the proportion of care leavers who are homeless or involved in crime. They’re seen as a drag on society. It’s never reported that 6% of care leavers are at university.’

Demonstrating the perpetuation of negative stereotypes associated with those in the care system, the group agreed: *‘Care leavers are all tarred with the same brush. They’re seen as a ‘bad’ child, especially if they’re from a care home’*.

Homeless young people

One young person had presented a workshop for university social work students. When he asked them to describe a homeless person, they focused on old men, drunks, tramps, alcoholics, drug addicts. These stereotypes did not relate to the homeless young person or his experiences but he considered they were reinforced by the media.

A project worker stated that, before Christmas, journalists regularly contact their organisation for a young person’s story: *‘They want a sob story’*. A homeless young person commented that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive had given his details to the media without his knowledge or permission, raising a profound ethical issue.

Sectarianism

Young people from a Protestant community considered the media divisive in how it framed questions or produced reports on particular communities. They described how, in a television programme involving young people from their estate, ‘one word said by a young person to describe other people was potentially damaging to perceptions about young people’: ‘Asked whether he had any friends from the Catholic community, he replied “Do I have any Fenian friends?” making it seem like he was sectarian’.

Discussing photographs of the flag protests, the same group commented: ‘It makes it look like Protestants are doing more rioting’. Challenging simplistic assumptions, one young person stated: ‘People may think that people associated with Unionism are all thugs, which isn’t true’.

‘Newcomers’

Revealing how negative ‘labels’ applied to specific groups are not necessarily internalised, children from a Lithuanian community were asked about media stories focusing on ‘newcomers’ whose families had moved to Northern Ireland. The assumption was that they would discuss media coverage of their community’s experiences. However, they responded by discussing ‘Travellers’.

Children and young people with disabilities

Describing how children with disabilities are represented in the media, a group of children and young people with special needs/ learning disabilities outlined negative storylines taken from their experiences: ‘Not being social with friends’; ‘As “messers”, but it’s not the child’s fault’; ‘OCD’; ‘Can’t read or write’.

Asked whether they thought there should be more people with disabilities on television, their responses were mixed:

‘Why not?!’

‘There’s a wheelchair presenter on Newsround.’

‘They shouldn’t have people in wheelchairs as presenters – they need to be able to walk.’

‘There should be more people with learning disabilities and more signing.’

Illustrating their perception that often children with disabilities are ignored, one young person commented: ‘Pretend you don’t have

a disability so you get your voice heard’.

Children and young people in custody

Children and young people in custody discussed how negative labels are often internalised and that some young people view media reports as contributing to notoriety. One young man referred to the UTV reporting on his prosecution: ‘Fuck them.... I was famous like’.

Asked how they felt about media reports, they replied: ‘Don’t care if people have a good or bad opinion of me’; ‘I don’t give a fuck what people think’; ‘I don’t care... it’s a whole pile of shit’.

However, young people were concerned about the impact of negative reporting on their family relationships: ‘My Ma and Granda would say, “You’re a wee fuckin’ scumbag”’.

Another young man stated that the media never contextualise young people’s behaviour, and background information was rarely provided in news items on young people’s involvement in ‘anti-social behaviour’ or ‘crime’:

‘They are unhappy because they are unloved... if your Ma doesn’t love you you are gonna wreck home, do drugs, drink and do what you do... but they [the newspaper] are sayin’ that it’s all the young person’s fault... Why are they outta control? Cause they all got their own problems.’

Impact of Negative Media Representation

Gordon’s (2006; 2012) research includes first-hand accounts of children’s and young people’s experiences of the impact of negative media reporting on their lives, on relationships within their communities, the fear of punishment attacks, and how they are treated and policed formally and informally. It also assesses the impact of negative stereotyping and labelling on their future prospects, including employment and accessing services.

In the project’s research, the impact of negative media reporting on how children and young people perceive themselves and their peers, and how adults in their communities, criminal justice agencies and social services view and respond, were issues of concern raised in all the groups.

Negative labelling

In discussion groups children and young people highlighted the impact of negative labelling, associating an ascribed ‘bad reputation’ with exclusion by adults and by their peers. This impacted on relationships within communities, in particular inter-generational relationships:

‘Because media portray kids like that so much, older people... it’s instilled so much fear’

‘If I seen that I would feel bad... if I seen a woman crossover ‘cause she was scared of me... It’s happened to me before like.’

Children and young people considered that a ‘bad reputation’ and the negative labels ascribed to them were unfair and had long-lasting consequences:

‘No-one deserves a bad name they get or a reputation because it will impact the rest of your life. A bad reputation is easy to get, a good reputation is hard to get... it takes a lot more to get a good reputation than it does to get a bad reputation’.

Workshops with young people in the Juvenile Justice Centre presented a unique insight into how a ‘bad reputation’ impacts on their experiences within the criminal justice system and their families’ responses. They were also concerned that negative labels affected subsequent behaviour: ‘If you get a bad reputation, they already think you’re like that, you might as well just be like that’.

Discrimination

Children and young people highlighted the stigma and negative stereotypes attached by the media to particular groups. Generally, they felt: ‘Youth is a label and it is pretty much discrimination’. They asserted that comparable behaviour by adults would not be similarly represented:

‘You see older people drinkin’ on the streets too and they never [put] drunk adults in the papers.’

‘The paper would get done for racism or discrimination [if they wrote about other social groups in the same

manner as they referred to young people].’

The discussion of discrimination in one group referred to the Flag Protests and it was stated that: ‘If it was a young person who stood in front of a police landrover we’d get prosecuted for it but Gerry Kelly [Sinn Féin MLA] didn’t’. Young people felt that in contrast to adults the discrimination they experienced included policing, prosecution and punishment.

They considered they were stereotyped negatively by their clothes and styles:

‘People wearing tracksuits would be seen like that.’

‘Young people with long hair, piercings, tattoos and t-shirts like mine are seen like this.’

‘Anyone who wears a hood is seen as a bad person’.

Young people felt that the media’s labelling of ‘hoodies’ and its association with anti-social behaviour was unfair. Yet all groups stated that hooded sweaters were a preference: ‘that’s what you get in our shops ... I wear them cause they are comfortable’.

‘Climate of fear’

Children and young people described how media representations played a key role in creating a fear in communities, in particular impacting on intergenerational relationships:

‘It [media representation] might make people think all young people are trouble-makers ... It’s not all young people.’

‘Wee grannies and all might be scared like.’

‘It makes old people feel more vulnerable.’

‘It’s fear-mongering – making people scared of children, gangs.’

Over-regulation

Children and young people’s responses demonstrated the impact of negative media representations on how they were treated and regulated, both informally and formally, by adults within their communities particularly the police and paramilitaries.

Young people made a link between the differences in the media representation of children and of young people and their treatment:

‘Say if someone went into a shop like our age and say someone my wee nephew’s age (5) went in, they’d be more interested in him (points to the young man next to her) rather than the wee kid... they’d think he’d (points to young man next to her) be more likely to steal something.’

‘Teenagers around our ages, we can’t get away with nothing, but if you’re a wee ‘un and walk into a shop they don’t say nothing, you’re not looked at the way we are.’

‘Wee kids get treated differently to young people.’

Young people associated the media’s negativity with formal and informal monitoring, policing and harassment in their communities. They described being ‘looked at’ suspiciously or ‘stopped by the police’ when they wore their ‘hoods up’. This was ‘unfair’, as ‘walking down the street with a hood up’ was ‘doing nothin’ wrong’.

Young people also described how the police and paramilitaries regulated their movements in their communities, with descriptions of punishment attacks by paramilitaries inflicting serious injury: ‘Community peelers just torture you and then the Provies just beat the life outta you and all... it’s not a good place like’.

Identifying Omissions

Children and young people spoke at length about the absence of their voices and opinions in news coverage and the media’s failure to address issues affecting their lives. They made suggestions for improved news and features coverage.

Views and experiences of children and young people

‘Balanced’ reporting should include children’s and young people’s voices, achieved by ensuring the presence of ‘both points of view... adults and children’ in news coverage. All groups considered that children’s and young people’s voices were omitted purposefully thus enabling the media to report in a way that ‘suits them’:

‘They don’t interview young people, even about young people’s issues like the Troubles and how they are affected.’

‘It’s all about Government issues. You don’t hear young people say what would be a good idea, it’s all just the politicians.’

Priorities and interests

Young people stated that children and young people are ‘unique’, that ‘everyone’s different’ and should not be categorised or stereotyped, and that the media generalise and should accept differences and unique qualities. Asked what they thought the media should include, young people were keen to promote balance:

‘There seems to be a focus on bad press. They don’t show the good stuff.’

‘It should be more positive ... You need to know about ‘bad’ things, but it would be nice to hear a happy story in between!’

Young people made suggestions to achieve fairer media coverage, in particular, the presentation of ‘factual information’ and raising deeper questions about rioting, perceived ‘anti-social behaviour’ and ‘crime’:

‘Back it up with facts and investigate and ask questions, for example, why are young people on the streets?’

Young people raised several issues they considered should be addressed in depth, including their views about the impact on the lives, experiences and prospects of children and young people. The issues were:

‘Drugs, alcohol.’

‘Lack of job opportunities.’

‘Young people are victims.’

‘Issues for young mums.’

‘Housing advice; mental health support; hostels – the reality.’

‘Ideas about solutions to problems and how to change the situation.’

‘Self-harm – phone numbers and where you can get help.’

Young people considered these issues extended beyond media reporting and should be addressed by politicians and policy-makers.

Positive coverage

All children and young people involved in the workshops believed there were few examples of media coverage that portrayed them making a positive contribution to their communities: ‘Only now and then.’ Significantly, all groups called for ‘more positive’ representations of children and young people in the media:

‘More positive things on young people... need more positive P.R.’

‘Should include more positive things... what projects they are involved in.’

‘[The media should] leave out the negatives, if it’s going to be a positive story, keep it positive, don’t start with negatives, keep it short and sweet.’

When discussing positive stories, examples were related to sports or academic achievements:

‘When a twelve year old wins a golf award. Even then, it’s only on the back page!’

‘If they’ve done a dance or played football.’

‘If they win a match - camogie, hurling, hockey, football, ice hockey, basketball.’

‘GCSE results’ or ‘Passing exams.’

All groups considered that for a young person to be represented positively they had to achieve something ‘exceptional’ or ‘extreme’.

Children and young people stated that by focusing on a full range of positive stories the media would challenge and balance the prevailing negative coverage. They called for more ‘success stories and more inspirational stories’ because the ‘success of young people is not recognised’. Core positive examples raised by young people were: ‘young people doing good within the community’ and ‘young people volunteering’. Children from a Polish community group stated: ‘There should be more good stories, so that children copy them’.

Challenging Negative Portrayals: The Way Forward

The vibrant and committed children and youth sectors in Northern Ireland have long highlighted, challenged and campaigned about the media’s negative portrayal of young people. Gordon’s earlier in-depth research concluded that, ‘future debates, discussions, policies and practices in this area must ensure that children and young people’s voices and experiences are valued and considered central to their development’ (Gordon 2012). What follows establishes priorities for action arising from the research, workshops and consultations.

Promoting and protecting children’s rights

In its 2008 Concluding Observations to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted the prevalence of a ‘general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children, especially adolescents ... including in the media’ which ‘may be often the underlying cause of further infringements of their rights’. (CRC, 2008: para 24). The Committee also criticised the UK Government for failing to establish ‘sufficient measures to protect children ... from negative media representation and public “naming and shaming”’ (para 36).

It was evident from the workshops and consultations that children and young people were keen to learn more about their rights. Regarding the media this included the right to privacy and to be consulted in media coverage that had an impact on their lives, particularly paying due regard to the Convention’s principles of ‘non-discrimination’, ‘best interests’ and ‘respect for the views of the child’. Northern Ireland is a society in transition from conflict where paramilitary punishments of children persist. Thus it is crucial that the lives of children and young people are not compromised by media coverage that ‘names and shames’,

thereby leading to punishment beatings or shootings.

The forthcoming examination of the UK Government's compliance with its children's rights obligations is due in 2016. Within Northern Ireland the Children's Law Centre, in partnership with Save the Children, is compiling a shadow report for this examination. Partner organisations, individuals, children and young people have been invited to contribute to the reporting process. It is intended that the research findings and workshops conducted for this project on media representation of children and young people will contribute to the shadow report.

Hearing children's and young people's voices, experiences, and interests

It is well-established that in setting the 'news agenda' and in prioritising 'newsworthy' stories prominence is given to 'powerful definers' – those in positions of institutional authority whose views and accounts take precedence over others. This is evident particularly with regard to children and young people whose views are marginalised not only because they lack access to institutional decision-making but also because they are not adults.

In the workshops all young people raised concerns about the lack of media engagement and the general view was that the media fail to engage with children and young people in Northern Ireland, best summarised in the recommendation that the media, *'should include children [and] actually involve young people instead of talking about them'*.

Acknowledging the lives and circumstances of children and young people

Much contemporary research with children, young people and their advocates notes their marginalisation and exclusion from the public discourses concerning the circumstances in which they live, the facilities and opportunities available to them and the policies and practices that determine their lives. This extends to understanding their behaviour and experiences in the prevailing social, political and economic conditions. The project found that the media rarely contextualises its coverage of children and young people, nor does it provide relevant background information. The project's content analysis and workshops demonstrate that the omission of this information was central to the framing of news items as negative and condemnatory, particularly coverage of children and young people's perceived involvement in *'anti-social behaviour', 'crime'* and *'violence'*.

Children and young people called on those working in the media to maximise their active participation, and that of their advocates, in reporting their experiences in their communities and the challenges they face.

Ensuring positive representations

It is well-established in media research that *negative* news is given greater prominence than *positive* news. A regular diet of stories relating to crime, 'deviance' and offending behaviour are part of staple news coverage, particularly focusing on 'youth'. In analysing content and in workshops with children and young people it was clear that news coverage was predominantly negative with few stories about young people's achievements, or positive contributions within their communities.

The consensus was there should be more coverage specifically about children and young people – *'what they do'* and *'how's their life'* - including their involvement and achievements in sports, youth club activities, computer games, and academic success. Children and young people considered that they received positive coverage only when their achievements were exceptional. They proposed that *'more positive stories'* would have a beneficial impact on how they were perceived by adults and on children and young people's subsequent behaviour.

Recognising diversity

Gordon's (2012) analysis of print media content concluded that language employed by journalists form stereotypical representations, making broad and unsustainable generalisations about children and young people. In contributing to this project, children and young people asserted that *'not all of us are the same'*, making reference to their diverse identities, lifestyles, beliefs and histories. All considered that media coverage *'group all of us together'* particularly in the reporting of 'anti-social behaviour'.

All children and young people involved with the research proposed that in a fast-changing society it was important that increasing diversity was recognised in media coverage. Specific groups - children and young people with disabilities, homeless young people, children and young people in custody and 'newcomers' - emphasised the responsibilities attached to media acknowledgement of their unique experiences, perspectives and skills, thus promoting social inclusion.

Providing accessible information and raising awareness

All children and young people noted adults' reliance on the media for *'information', 'news opinion', 'entertainment'* and *'gossip'*. Yet the media also has the potential to provide significant access to appropriate information for children and young people. This is recognised in Article 17 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which obliges States to 'ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health'.

Further, Article 24 recognises the necessity for the provision of appropriate information to contribute to the realisation of the child's right to health and health services. States are expected to take appropriate measures to ensure that parents and children 'are informed, have access to education and are supported in the use of basic knowledge of child health'. Thus, the media has an important role in health promotion, through awareness-raising and education.

The media's role in information provision is further outlined in the Riyadh Guidelines in its contribution to the 'socialisation' of children. The mass media should be:

- 'encouraged to ensure that young persons have access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources.'
- 'encouraged to disseminate information on the existence of services, facilities and opportunities for young persons in society.'
- 'aware of its extensive social role and responsibility, as well as its influence, in communications relating to youthful drug and alcohol abuse. It should use its power for drug abuse prevention by relaying consistent messages through a balanced approach. Effective drug awareness campaigns at all levels should be promoted.'

While young people were critical of the print media in particular, referring to newspapers as *'one of the most unreliable sources of information'*, they made significant suggestions regarding how the media could fulfil an educational role; providing *'information'*

on *'housing advice'; 'hostels'; 'independent living'; 'mental health'; 'support'; 'jobs'; 'sexual health advice'*.

Challenging negative stereotypes about children, young people and specific groups

Editors and journalists play a defining role in reinforcing stereotypical representations of children and young peopleslanted towards 'distortions', 'exaggerations' and 'misrepresentations'. Most groups considered that language and images used in media reporting reinforce negative stereotypes and they *'make people think all young people are trouble-makers'*.

Those from specific groups noted the impact of negative stereotyping on their lives. For example, care leavers felt they were *'all tarred with the same brush ... a "bad" child, especially if they're from a care home'*. As the evidence discussed earlier demonstrates, young people who had experienced homelessness and children and young people with disabilities noted how stereotypical representations led to generalisations.

More broadly, all groups expressed frustration about the impact of generalisations, labels and stereotypes in media coverage. In its 2008 Concluding Observations, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended that the UK Government: 'ensure full protection against discrimination on any grounds ... taking urgent measures to address the intolerance and inappropriate characterization of children, especially adolescents, within the society, including in the media' (para 25a).

The workshop discussions endorsed this recommendation. Young people proposed that the media should *'challenge stereotypes'*, report on *'people's needs'*, and offer *'ideas about solutions to problems and how to change the situation'*. Those directly affected by negative media representations and 'naming and shaming', stated that they should have a direct right of reply.

They recommended meaningful media engagement and the significance of support from youth organisations in providing training for children, young people and those working in the media. This, they concluded, should extend to advocates who should be given the opportunity to represent the views of children and young people.

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Participants

The primary research workshops and interviews involved 141 children and young people aged 6 – 25 from the following groups:

- Belong*
- Cathedral Youth Club*
- Council for the Homeless NI*
- Derry Bytes*
- Give and Take, Armagh*
- Give and Take, Derry/Londonderry*
- Give and Take, Omagh*
- Headliners Belfast*
- Ideas Voice Action Forum, Include Youth*
- Northern Ireland Alternatives, Kilcooley*
- Out and About, YouthAction NI*
- PlayBoard*
- Sixth Sense*
- VOYPIC*
- Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre*
- YMCA, Lisburn*
- Young Men’s Group, Armagh, YouthAction NI*
- Young Men’s Group, East Belfast, YouthAction NI*
- Young Women’s Group, Newry, YouthAction NI*
- Young Women’s Group, West Belfast, YouthAction NI*
- Youth Initiatives Poleglass*

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